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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

22 November 1957

STAFF MEMORANDUM NO. 52-57

SUBJECT: The NATO Defense Problem

DOCUMENT NO. 56
NO CHANGE CLASS. ☐
☒ DECLASSIFIED
CLASS. CHANGED TO: SECRET
NEXT REVIEW DATE: 3/27/80
AUTH: HR 70-2
DATE: 3/27/80 REVIEWER: 007056

1. President Eisenhower's decision to attend the NATO council meeting in December is designed to buttress confidence in the alliance at a time when confusion over its purposes and strategies has become widespread. The problems besetting NATO are deeply rooted in the nature and implications of war in the nuclear age. There is increasing doubt among the European partners that the alliance is adequate or suited to the requirements of either a "limited" or a general conflict, whether involving nuclear weapons or not. This issue will underlie the discussions in December on the future of NATO. It will permeate the special NATO studies now in preparation by SACEUR and the Council that are expected to respond to the queries of the European members, anxious over the implementation of alliance strategy. But at best these discussions and studies

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will give only partial answers to problems which may not be solvable in the short run.

2. Background of the problem. NATO since its inception has been plagued with a continuing weakness: the diverging views and interests of the US on the one hand and the European allies on the other. In establishing the alliance in 1949 the US was primarily concerned with creating a large military force which could, at least, slow the progress of a Soviet invasion of Western Europe until the US atomic capability could be employed. But the European governments were particularly concerned with the corrosive effect of internal weaknesses and the threat of Communist subversion. There was a general tendency for them to regard their military efforts as a payment for US protection -- a protection which they hoped would restore sufficient continental confidence to resist Soviet pressures -- and as a quid pro quo necessary for the retention of sizable American ground forces on the Continent to guarantee US involvement in any European incident. These differing attitudes were among the reasons why a steadily increasing gap appeared between the goals set by NATO authorities (strongly supported by the US) for the European military contribution

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and the actual force levels which European governments believed their economies could support.

3. By 1954 it became clear that several powers simply would not meet the so-called Lisbon force goals. One reason was the general relaxation of tensions in Europe which developed following Stalin's death. Another reason was the growing belief that a condition of mutual deterrence was developing, and consequently that the danger of war was greatly receding. NATO authorities, however, under US pressure, still maintained that an effective ground force was required--if only to strengthen the deterrent. They persuaded the European members to base their strategic planning on the use of "tactical atomic weapons." This was represented as giving greater firepower with fewer troops; a highly mobile, well-armed smaller force was postulated to replace the WW II type of division. Thus, the "shield" would be stronger, and hope was held out that Western Europe could be held while the "sword" -- the nuclear capability of the US and UK -- performed its mission against the USSR.

4. The US proceeded to equip its forces in Europe to implement the new concept, but the forces of the European

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members remained essentially unchanged. The continental members possessed no nuclear capability, and the US came forward with no guidance as to what they could expect in the way of nuclear weapons. West Germany renounced the right to manufacture its own nuclear weapons, and it delayed punctual execution of its commitment to make a large conventional NATO contribution while debating its conscription ban and its force structure, and while awaiting clarification of the nuclear weapons question. The other governments, under domestic political pressure to reduce forces and defense expenditures, gradually undertook a series of measures which contracted their military capabilities.

5. By mid-1956 new problems arose. The movement of French NATO-earmarked forces to Algeria drained off shield strength. Greater awareness of the terrifying power of thermonuclear weapons seemed to suggest that any successful defense of Western Europe would be a Pyrrhic victory. This led to some expressions of concern over implementing the 1954 Council decisions which had approved use of atomic weapons for both shield and sword. At the same time the Europeans began to grow increasingly alarmed that US expressions suggesting

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primary reliance upon the nuclear deterrent presaged a US withdrawal from Europe. They were disturbed that Western Europe would be virtually defenseless except when the US specifically chose to protect the region by its nuclear power. Some of the smaller countries, on the other hand, began to display apprehension about the provocative aspect of stationing short range nuclear weapons on the perimeter of the USSR. Finally, it was becoming apparent that Soviet where the alliance was inoperative, where European initiatives were shifting to areas outside of Europe/ and US interests often diverged, and where troops geared to fight on the continent were ill-equipped to operate.

6. The Suez affair pointed up these fears and concerns. The British and French forces, lacking mobile striking forces, failed to deliver a quick and decisive defeat to Egypt. When the USSR made a veiled threat of attack upon the UK and France their utter defenselessness without US support was obvious to all. The resulting widespread confusion and dismay in Western Europe concerning the state of the alliance was expressed in the NATO ministerial meeting of last December. A review of NATO planning and strategy was set in motion to discover the most effective pattern of forces which could be achieved within

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the range of national defense budgets likely to be politically available. Among other things the military authorities were asked to examine the requirements for defense against limited military action. The ministers also approved recommendations for implementing the non-military aspects of the alliance.

7. The efforts of the NATO authorities were hardly under way when the UK revealed its new defense policies. Early in 1957 the British announcement of sharp cuts in NATO-committed ground forces and planes provoked a strong reaction from its continental partners. These countries attacked the British unilateral decision as dangerously affecting western defenses by (a) pushing NATO further in the direction of total reliance on nuclear power, both through weakening conventional forces and encouraging similar moves by others, (b) possible stimulating of a withdrawal of US ground forces from the Continent, and (c) placing the UK in a relationship to the US different from that of the other European allies. Debate at an agitated WEU meeting in March produced a series of questions--largely originating with Chancellor Adenauer--directed toward the North Atlantic Council and SACEUR, requesting a fresh review of NATO resources as affected by new concepts of nuclear warfare, especially the relationship of tactical to strategic nuclear weapons.

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8. The Present Situation. NATO is now engaged in an enormous task in trying to respond to demands for a strategic concept capable of implementation which will keep abreast of changing world conditions. It is making this attempt at a time when its weaknesses have become common knowledge. SACEUR has available only about half of the 30 divisions considered a minimum for the defense of Central Europe under the present strategy; there is a continuing trend toward reduction of service terms; conflicts of interests between individual NATO members have been painfully displayed in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean; despite some deliveries of modern weapons to the European allies, none of the continental countries now possess a nuclear capability. Finally, it appears to be a political axiom that none of the NATO members can be expected to increase defense expenditures.

9. SACEUR's response has almost certainly pleased those who deplored the apparent trend toward a strategy of massive nuclear resistance. He briefed the North Atlantic Council on 22 October and pointed out that--with the increase in Soviet nuclear capabilities--small engagements were more

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more likely than a major war, and that it was necessary to be able to deal with situations short of general war by means short of full counter-offensive. Moreover, in order to deter even limited engagements, which in Europe would possibly not remain limited, it was necessary for the shield forces to be capable of immediate reaction to local aggression. SACEUR also expressed his personal view that a NATO stockpile of nuclear weapons should be created. He deplored the seeming failure of NATO countries to agree on basic strategy, and he hoped that the December meeting could resolve this question.

10. SACEUR's reference to the necessity for dealing with situations short of general war has probably gone some way toward meeting a prime European concern. This concern is related to a not often stated fear that the triggering of any nuclear device, no matter how small or "clean", would automatically and rapidly lead to full scale nuclear war. In any case there exists an uneasy dread that the densely populated area of Western Europe would be devastated. Accordingly the Europeans tend to regard nuclear weapons, regardless of size, strictly as deterrent weapons, not as useful artillery to pacify some limited outburst or local satellite explosion. While SACEUR's statement may have

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reassured them that he was aiming at a Western reply which would not necessarily be massive retaliation, it failed to reassure them that the reply would not necessarily be nuclear.

11. Despite their fears of nuclear warfare, some Western Europeans remain greatly interested in acquiring nuclear weapons, independently of the US, primarily to assure themselves of a nuclear deterrent in the event of US should, for any reason, lose interest in European defense. At the same time, they recognize that it is beyond their power--given the present economic and political climate--both to develop an effective nuclear capability and to maintain effective conventional forces. Since they feel that both kinds of forces, or a mixture of them, are necessary in order to have adequate strategic flexibility, they feel that they need, first, to get the US to adopt essentially the same strategic views, and secondly, to adjust NATO military equipment and forces to this view, with whatever direct military assistance from the US and/or UK may be required.

12. Even should the December meeting agree on a strategy providing for non-nuclear as well as nuclear forces, there is

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still likely to be considerable delay over establishing such a novelty as a community nuclear weapons stockpile and considerable argument and confusion as to how to meet such new goals as may be established. The special report stating what forces are required by the various commands to carry out the NATO military mission will not be ready until the beginning of next year. As in the past, many issues will probably be held over for ministerial consideration next spring.

13. In any event, the problems which will confront the Chiefs of Government involve serious and possibly embarrassing implications at the domestic level for at least some of the participating governments. Provision of a NATO nuclear weapons stockpile under terms satisfactory to Western Europe would probably involve a change in US legislation. A new strategic concept may involve some alteration in the defense policies to which the British Government has made a heavy political commitment. It is by no means certain that these political groups in France now pressing for an independent nuclear weapons program would be satisfied with NATO arrangements for a community stockpile. Finally, unless the

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December meeting makes decisions which win general acceptance and compliance the crisis of confidence within NATO might be aggravated rather than dissipated.

14. The Western European countries are fairly clear on two things: (a) they want to deter minor incursions and threats as well as a general conflict, and (b) they do not want either a strategic situation or a political arrangement in which the decision regarding their protection is made elsewhere. Yet there is no indication that any NATO country will spend the increased sums necessary to give the alliance a flexible defense system. Nor are there grounds for believing that, in order to further the aims of the alliance, any major NATO country will forego its national interests in acquiring the prestige presumed to flow from possession of a nuclear capability. Moreover, the interests of several European powers in fending off Soviet threats in colonial areas are leading to additional drains on NATO conventional troop strength. Thus the problem of achieving a suitable balance in the total NATO defense posture between nuclear and conventional armaments is one that increasingly threatens the cohesiveness of the alliance.


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15. Failure to make decisions which would win quick and widespread support would not only fail to correct the present dissatisfaction and confusion, but might even stimulate the latent centrifugal impulses of some NATO members. In the shorter term the decline of NATO would more likely take the form of (a) token nuclear weapon production in fourth countries and the gradual acquisition of a capability for a more complex nuclear weapons program, (b) the enlargement and favoring of non-NATO committed forces in the development of national defense forces, and (c) the gradual impoverishment of NATO-committed forces. Over the longer term there might even be a gradual tendency toward armed neutrality. This is a solution which might seem attractive to the Scandinavian members, following the Swedish model. It is also conceivable that, once the ICBM becomes a stockpile weapon in both the US and USSR, even the larger countries might conclude that, if they possessed a substantial nuclear capability, they would have a chance of preserving themselves from destruction through neutrality--on the theory that the USSR might choose to concentrate its resources against the North American Continent without taking on its well-armed Western European neighbors as well.

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16. From a Western European point of view the deterrent to general war, if it exists at all, must be with US nuclear power. So long as this deterrent exists, the danger lies not so much in a Soviet general attack westward as in "nibbles" in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. One of the major worries of Western Europe is the possibility that the West will not or cannot counter or prevent these nibbles except through the threat of nuclear war. The Western European would prefer an alternate military possibility. Another and probably more serious worry is the danger he sees in the lack of a common policy toward the Soviet bloc. He is not satisfied that the decision for the West should be left to Washington. What the Western Europeans currently need from NATO is a feeling that they share in the political as well as the military decisions which determine their fate.

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